

# Teenage Grief



Professional Development Materials

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**School of Education**

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*Director*  
Professor Janet Ainley

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Dear Colleague,

We are writing to you as someone who is engaged in the initial or in-service professional development of practitioners working with teenagers and their families. We enclose complimentary materials on the subject of bereavement, in the hope that these may be useful to you when planning your courses.

The death of a close family member has a profound effect on the life of a young person. Every adult who has contact with them can help them, but many people feel unsure of what to do or say. We hope this professional development package will raise people's awareness and increase their confidence in this area of work.

The professional skills and understanding developed by this course have also proven useful for those working with teenagers affected by other losses (for example, those going into care, or affected by divorce or separation) and across all ages.

This project was initiated by Leeds Animation Workshop and has been supported by a wide range of individuals and organisations. Our thanks go to everyone who has given their time and encouragement, especially the Childhood Bereavement Network, and Family Care Nottingham.

Our thanks go to the Parenting Fund and the Healthy Leeds Special Grants Programme for financing the DVD, "Teenage Grief" and this professional development package. We hope you find the materials thought-provoking and useful.

Yours sincerely,

Rose Griffiths  
University of Leicester

Sacha Richardson  
The Laura Centre, Leicester

P.S. If you use these materials before December 2008, we would be pleased to hear your views on them. Please e-mail Rose Griffiths: [rnag1@le.ac.uk](mailto:rnag1@le.ac.uk).

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Images are by Leeds Animation Workshop.

All the printed materials included in this pack are also available on the Childhood Bereavement Network website (which is hosted by the National Children's Bureau). [www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)

The website has a "Powerpoint" version of the presentation slides, which you can download if you have Powerpoint on your computer

# Teenage Grief Professional Development Materials: Tutor's Notes

## Preparation

These notes are provided as a guide. They give you a pattern for a two-hour session that we have used with participants including foster carers and parents, and from a variety of professions, both with people at the beginning of their professional training, and as in-service professional development for experienced staff. Please adapt the session as appropriate, for your own context. For example, you may want to allow more time.

## Group size

This session has been used successfully with group sizes from 4 to 35 participants. We feel the ideal group size is below 24, in order to provide the most opportunities for discussion, but we appreciate that initial training courses may need to use larger groups.

## Tutor

We hope that the notes and materials we have provided will make it possible for any experienced tutor who has a background in work with young people, or in health, teaching, social care or other work with families, to deliver this session. You do not have to have a background in bereavement support.

Before you deliver the session, you will find it helpful to watch the DVD at least once, and read all the notes (including the booklet in the DVD itself). You will also need time to print handouts and materials. If you are commissioning someone to run this course, we suggest you allow 3 hours for preparation time, the first time they run it.

If your organisation would like to find someone who could deliver this course on your behalf, you could contact the Childhood Bereavement Network ([www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)) who will help you find a local tutor.

## Materials

You will need:

- A copy of the DVD "Teenage Grief" (If you do not have a copy already, you may be able to borrow it through your local library, or you can buy it from Leeds Animation Workshop: [www.leedsanimation.org.uk](http://www.leedsanimation.org.uk))
- DVD player (or laptop computer with speakers, for a small group)
- Overhead projector or data projector
- Overhead transparencies or Powerpoint presentation (the latter is available on the Childhood Bereavement Network website: [www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)).

## Materials

You will need:

*continued*

- Enough copies of the 3 handouts:
  - (a) Sheets for note-taking while watching the DVD (pages E1 and E2)
  - (b) The Needs of Bereaved Teenagers (F1 to F4)
  - (c) Useful Organisations (N.B. Before you copy this handout, fill in the contact details of a local bereavement support organisation if you can. Contact the Childhood Bereavement Network for help with this if needed). (J1)
- Spare pens and paper for note-taking
- One set of "Frequently Asked Questions", printed on card and cut up, per 8 to 12 participants. (N.B. Before the session, choose which 12 questions out of the 16 provided are most useful for your context. See the notes on page C5 below).

You may sometimes wish to provide copies of the Tutor's Notes on Frequently Asked Questions, (pages I1 to I7) or of the complete notes from the DVD. The latter are provided in booklet form in the DVD case, but they can also be printed as A4 sheets, from the DVD itself.

As with any professional development session, you may wish to have a register, name labels, and refreshments (available at the beginning and in the break).

### Structure of the session

The pattern we have found most successful is as follows:

- 1. Introduce** the topic, and the aims of the session. **10 – 15 minutes**
- 2. Show the DVD**, "Teenage Grief" and give people time to discuss it. **Approx. 35 minutes**
- 3. Talk through the Needs of Bereaved Teenagers** using OHTs and notes. **Approx. 15 minutes**

*Coffee break* **10 – 15 minutes**

- 4. Frequently asked questions:** discussion in pairs or threes, then feed back to whole group. **30 minutes**
- 5. Summary:** information about further help and resources. **10 minutes**

**N.B.** In the notes that follow, the sections in speech marks are not a script, but just suggestions of the kind of thing you could say. Please use your own words to convey these ideas.

## 1. Introduction 10 - 15 minutes Using five OHTs/ Powerpoint slides (pages D1 to D5)

### OHT1: Teenage Grief

If you are working with a group of participants who do not already know each other, start by giving people the chance to say their name and where they are from (for a small group), or (if it is a larger group) tell everyone which organisations people have come from, and ask them to introduce themselves to anyone they talk with during the session.

“Our main focus during this session is on teenagers and bereavement, but you will find many of the things we discuss are relevant to people of all ages, and in other situations of loss.”

### OHT2: The aims of this session

Start by saying something like: “The topic of this session is not an easy one to deal with, and it may feel especially hard for any of you who have suffered from a bereavement or loss yourself, especially as a child. It is important to look after yourself, and pay attention to your own feelings. If you feel very uncomfortable at any point, do feel able to step outside for a while. This is a sad topic; but I hope that this session will help you feel that you are better able to help young people who are having to cope with the death of someone close to them. At the same time, just as it is important for bereaved young people to know that it’s ok to have fun, that’s true for us, too, during this session.”

Then briefly point out aims, as listed on the OHT.

### OHT3: Everyone has to cope with change and loss

“To set the scene: every one of us learns to deal with change and loss in our lives. There are some examples on this overhead. Sometimes the changes are positive – but they can still feel stressful. Sometimes the changes are ones that we did not want to happen – and these may be difficult to come to terms with.

“Teenagers’ lives, too, are full of changes and the feelings of loss (small and large) that come with change. ”

### OHT4: Being a teenager

“Adolescence and early adulthood are times when we all develop and change. The physical changes are obvious, but changes to the brain and the way a person thinks and feels can also be significant.

“This is a time, as children become adults, where they are striving to become independent from their parents or carers, but at the same time they benefit from continuity and by feeling connected to their parents.

“You are probably familiar with many of the aspects of being a teenager which are listed here...”

## OHT 5: Teenagers and loss

"Here are some examples of the changes which many teenagers will go through, and they are also changes which will result in some feelings of loss.

"The Childhood Bereavement Network estimates that about 1 in 25 children and young people currently of school age have experienced the death of a parent or a sibling, and many more are coping with the death of someone else close to them. Our main focus in this session is on loss through death – but you may find that many of the things we talk about, will help you think about other situations where children will grieve because they have lost contact with someone who was important to them.

"We're going to watch a DVD now, which will tell you the stories of six teenagers and their experiences. Each story is quite short, and aims to get you thinking about the range of feelings and reactions that any bereaved young person might experience."

### 2. Teenage Grief DVD **Approx. 35 minutes**

Give out the sheets for making notes (E1 and E2) about the stories on the DVD. Explain that participants may want to jot things down whilst they are watching the DVD, and they may want to add further notes when they are discussing the stories afterwards.

Play the DVD (approx 13 minutes).

Afterwards, ask people to get into pairs or threes (no more), and say you are going to give them between 5 and 10 minutes to talk about the stories and the things they had found helpful or thought-provoking in the DVD.

Take turns around the room, asking people to contribute thoughts on what they felt were important things to remember from the DVD, and from their own professional setting if appropriate (remembering the need for anonymity when describing particular young people's circumstances).

The things which people contribute during this section will bring up many of the issues summarised in section 3, so a useful discussion here, even if it uses extra time, will mean you can move more quickly through the "Needs of Bereaved Teenagers".

### 3. Needs of Bereaved Teenagers **Approx. 15 minutes**

*Using nine OHTs/ Powerpoint slides (pages G1 to G9)*

Give out the handout of notes on the "ten needs". Talk through each need, using the numbered OHTs, and your copy of the handout. Remind people that even though we are concentrating on the needs of teenagers, these are common to bereaved people of all ages.

## COFFEE BREAK 10 - 15 minutes

#### **4. Frequently asked questions Approx. 30 minutes**

Use your choice of question cards, and the tutor's notes provided later in this pack.

We have provided 16 different FAQs, and some blank speech bubbles so that you can write questions of your own if you wish. In the time available, we suggest you use just 12 questions. The first eight questions (a to h) are "core questions"; please use those, and then choose 4 further questions that are appropriate for the context in which your participants are working. One set of the question cards is enough for 8 to 12 people. Make duplicate sets for further participants.

Ask people to get into pairs or threes. Give each pair 3 questions to discuss, and explain that they will have about 10 minutes to talk about their questions, and then you will ask people to take turns at feeding back their thoughts.

Go round the room, asking each group to choose just one question to feed back on. Use the tutor's notes on the FAQs (see later) to help you add any extra comments. If you are working with a smaller group, you may be able to go round a second time, or even a third, until you have had comments on all twelve questions, or as many as you have time for.

Collect the question cards back, to use another time.

(Optional: Give out the handout about frequently asked questions).

#### **5. Summary Approx. 10 minutes**

"We have covered a lot of issues in a very short time. I hope you have found it worthwhile. There is obviously a great deal more to learn than we could possibly cover in such a short time, but there are many organisations which can help."

Give out the handout, "Useful Organisations". These organisations' websites provide information about training, useful books and resources, and support for children and families who have been bereaved. Winston's Wish have a national telephone helpline, and Childhood Bereavement Network have an online directory of local services. Practitioners can play a useful part in making sure families know that there are many people who can help them, and many people who will understand what they are going through.

Point out that many bereavement support organisations will offer support to people who need help, even if their bereavement was a long time ago. This may be helpful to practitioners who find a young person's bereavement raises issues for them personally. Similarly, many doctors will be able to refer their patients for help.

Say that if they would like to watch the DVD again, or lend it to families affected by bereavement, it can be borrowed through many public libraries. (If your organisation has copies which you can lend out, explain what the arrangements are.) The DVD can be purchased from Leeds Animation Workshop (contact details on the bottom of the note-taking sheet which people used when watching the DVD).

Thank everyone for their participation in the training session.

Rose Griffiths, University of Leicester School of Education

Sacha Richardson, The Laura Centre, 4-6 Tower Street, Leicester.



1.

# Teenage Grief:

thinking about bereavement  
and young people



## 2.

# The aims of this session...

- to increase your awareness of the issues surrounding bereavement and young people.
- to help you feel more confident about supporting bereaved teenagers and their parents or carers.
- to tell you about where you can go to get additional help.

### 3.

# Everyone has to cope with change and loss...

For example:

- Moving - house and friends
- Starting school, college, work
- Examinations; job hopes
- Serious illness or disability
- Relationship breakdowns
- Redundancy
- Bereavement

## 4.

# Being a teenager

- Physical changes  
Changes to your body; hormones!  
Need more sleep but not tired at night
- Cognitive development  
Greater capacity for reasoning;  
Less empathy
- Emotional and social development  
Separating from parents or carers;  
Growing independence;  
More impulsive, self-conscious  
and self-centred;  
Idealism; Sexuality;  
Developing an identity.

## 5.

# Teenagers and loss

For example:

- Loss of childhood
- Changing school or college
- Starting work
- Changing relationships
- Leaving home
- Parental relationship breakdown
- Parental illness
- Bereavement
- Rejection and failure (with exams, jobs, driving test ...)

# Teenage Grief

Please use these sheets to make notes while you are watching the DVD. You may also want to write down questions you would like to discuss.

1. Adam whose grandmother dies.



2. Emily whose mother dies after a long illness.



3. Nasreen's father dies suddenly.



4. Marcus's sister is killed in a road accident.



5. Laura loses a friend through suicide.



6. Nathan whose mother is murdered.



If you want to watch this DVD again, you may be able to borrow it through your local library, or you can purchase it from Leeds Animation Workshop, [www.leedsanimation.org.uk](http://www.leedsanimation.org.uk), tel.0113 248 4997, 45 Bayswater Road, Leeds, LS8 5LF

# The Needs of Bereaved Teenagers

The following notes draw heavily on the work of **William Worden** as well as our own experience of working with bereaved young people. In *"Children and Grief"*, (Guilford Press, New York, 1996) Worden summarises the findings of the two year long Harvard bereavement study, which charted the impact of the death of a parent.

Worden states that children and young people have ten needs:

## 1. Adequate information.

Everybody needs clear information given in a sensitive manner after a death. Sometimes assumptions and expectations get in the way. Some adults assume teenagers have heard or understood things that they have not. Young people sometimes believe they shouldn't need to ask questions, or perhaps, may fear the reaction they will get if they talk about what has happened.

It is important to give enough information without overwhelming a young person. Sometimes with traumatic death (suicide or murder) it may help to provide information in stages. If teenagers are not given enough information by the adults around them, they may fill in the gaps themselves, sometimes inaccurately. Young people sometimes think they know or understand more than they actually do. This may cause misunderstandings or rumours.

Some families have spiritual or religious beliefs about death. If talking about these matters, it is important to respect both the teenager's and their family's views, recognising that these could be different.

If at all possible, it is helpful for young people to be prepared if someone close to them has a terminal illness.

## 2. Fears and anxieties addressed.

It is a natural reaction to feel frightened following a death. Young people may particularly fear that a surviving parent (or carer) will die or that they may die themselves. Sometimes lack of understanding about a particular death, or death in general, may exacerbate fears. Clear accurate information helps - for example, talking about dad dying from a brain tumour and how this is different to having a headache. It is important to reassure wherever possible, but equally it is important to be truthful. Fears are often worse at night, especially at bedtime or at other times of separation (e.g. going to school, going on a trip or staying at someone else's house).

When we feel frightened or anxious it may limit what we feel able to do. For example a young person may not want to go out of the family home or go somewhere where they would have to meet new people. It is helpful to have a balance between acknowledging these feelings and encouraging young people to carry on with important aspects of life.

It can be especially difficult for teenagers to talk about their fears and anxieties because



they may feel too vulnerable and may worry about being judged. Sometimes this results in angry, resentful or withdrawn behaviour. It is often helpful to find a quiet time to ask if there are any questions, thoughts or things that are worrying them. Sharing how you feel or how you might feel in their shoes may help.

### **3. Reassurance they are not to blame**

Adults and children often feel that they could have done something differently that may have prevented a death. A natural part of teenagers' development is to over-emphasize their role in things. This may intensify their feelings of guilt and they need reassurance and explanations about why they are not to blame.

Sometimes in families, especially following suicide, there is a desire to blame someone for a death and people will feel very angry. It is important that young people are not targeted for this blame and understand that the anger is not directed at them.

Teenagers often have ambivalent feelings towards parents and siblings. It is not unusual for them to have been involved in angry scenes pre-death. This can lead to a teenager believing that the person who died did not know that they loved them. It can help them to remind them of the times they showed they cared and other positive aspects of their relationship.

### **4. Careful listening and watching**

We all show our thoughts and feelings in many ways, not just by what we say. Young people may express their feelings through their behaviour and the way they relate to others. Maybe they do not do things they always used to enjoy, or it seems very important to do something that the deceased person did. They may go very quiet at a particular time, or make a big fuss about something that might appear insignificant.

Teenagers will sometimes find it easier to talk while you are doing something else, like washing up or preparing a meal. Perhaps this is because they feel less self-conscious. It is important to respond to their approaches positively. Sometimes it may be worth creating these opportunities, for instance by travelling somewhere together. Often it really helps to share something of our own experience first, without assuming that the young person will feel the same.

Sometimes it is easier for teenagers (and some younger children) to talk to someone outside of the family. It may be helpful to encourage them to find an opportunity to meet with someone they like in a setting that helps them to communicate.

### **5. Validation of Individuals' feelings**

The Harvard bereavement study found that 2 years after death, one quarter of the children had been admonished for not showing enough feeling, whereas another quarter had been told they should have finished grieving. This latter group included children and young people who reported high levels of crying into the second year (Worden).

Allow for individual differences both in feelings and in the expression of feelings. There is not one way to grieve; in fact there are as many ways to grieve as there are people.

It is important to let a bereaved person know that the death, however painful, is something they can talk about. However, it is not helpful to make comments like: "I know how you

feel", "You've got to be brave", "You should try and forget it", or "At least you've got another sister". These all have the effect of stopping any real conversation about what has happened, and denying the reality of the loss.

Sometimes validating a feeling, especially feelings of despair or deep pain, help us to move through those feelings, at least temporarily. When we believe it is not OK to feel something our feelings can get locked away inside us. This can make them harder to deal with and may lead to difficulties in later life.

## **6. Help with overwhelming feelings**

We all sometimes need to protect ourselves from difficult or painful feelings. Sometimes young people want to pretend that something awful has not happened, or at least to forget about it for a while. It is important to respect this need, at the same time as providing an environment that encourages confidence in our natural capacity to deal with difficult emotions.

Sometimes young people will feel very angry, destructive, anxious or withdrawn. They need to know that this is normal and they are not alone.

Adults need to balance teenagers' need for consistent boundaries and expectations about their behaviour, with an acceptance that they may be less capable than you would usually expect from someone of their age.

Some teenagers will find it helpful to engage in sport or another activity where they can let off steam or tire themselves out. Time with friends may provide valuable relaxation and the opportunity to "switch off" for a while.

## **7. Involvement and inclusion.**

Young people should be given an informed choice about their roles in rituals and activities which surround a death. This may include visiting a sick person before death, seeing the body after death, their involvement in the funeral and their opinions about memorials.

Many young people will never have been involved in any of the customs or ceremonies around death before a significant loss, so they need clear explanations of what they may expect to see, how long things will take and why things are arranged in a particular way. Most young people believe they should have a choice about whether to view a body and most who choose to do so will find it helpful.

These are just some of the ways teenagers have been involved: helping choose what the deceased wears, providing a photo or letter to be placed in the coffin, writing something to be said at the funeral, choosing music or a poem for the ceremony, helping organise a memorial event, creating a memorial website or suggesting a charity for donations in memory of the deceased.

Young people need to feel needed and valued. They can contribute to all aspects of every day life including providing practical help and emotional support to the adults around them, to balance the help they receive themselves.

## **8. Continued Routine Activities**

Young people benefit from being able to continue routine, previously enjoyed activities and interests. It is sometimes hard for adults to see them wanting to carry on with things so soon after a death (e.g. going to a club with their friends). It is natural to dip in and out of grief, and just as adults need to carry on with the normal routines of daily life (making meals, cleaning the house etc.), so teenagers need their normal activities. Often these will focus on spending time with their peers.

It is especially important following traumatic loss to provide as much stability and continuity as possible. The death of someone close is often very frightening. Continuity helps to re-establish stability and helps teenagers to realise that though life will never be the same there are still many things that remain constant.

## **9. Modelled grief behaviours**

“Children (and young people) learn how to mourn by observing mourning behaviour in adults.” (Worden p. 145). Adults can promote an environment where it is easy to talk about the deceased and to acknowledge good and bad memories.

When talking about such things it is natural to feel sad. Other feelings which might be important to acknowledge are anger, guilt, relief, confusion and fear. If an adult can model handling these difficult feelings it will help a teenager too. It is important to do this in a way that does not overwhelm them or give them more information than they want, but young people are usually very good at letting us know when they have had enough.

We should acknowledge that none of us have all the answers and there is no “right” way to grieve.

## **10. Opportunities to remember.**

When someone who played a significant part in our life dies there will be countless moments when we are reminded of their absence. When a family is able to speak about the deceased naturally, it helps a teenager to make sense of their own reality. At the same time it is important to respect that any individual may need to protect themselves from pain at times, and at times they may not want to talk about the deceased.

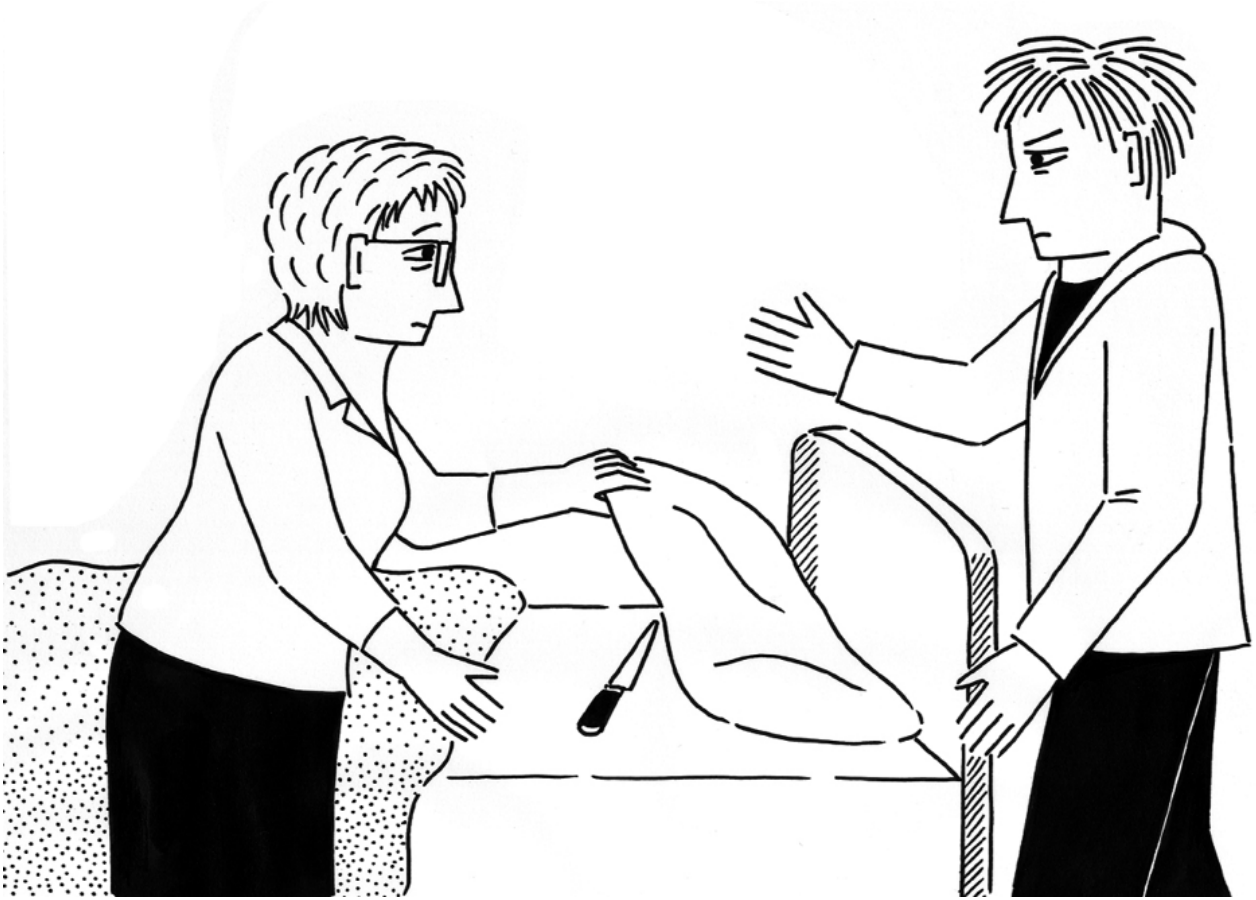
Sometimes when significant events are coming up, like anniversaries or Christmas it is useful to plan in advance how the day will be spent. Families have found it helpful to do something in memory of the deceased at the beginning of big family occasions, for example, a visit to the grave or other memorial or looking at some photos together. Such times can also be a good opportunity to remind everyone that it is OK to have fun, perhaps by saying something like: “I’m sure Mum would want us all to enjoy Christmas as much as possible, though we are bound to feel sad that she is not here.”

# 1. Teenagers need adequate information.



**Laura**

## 2. Teenagers need their fears and anxieties addressed.



**Nathan**

### 3. Young people need reassurance they are not to blame.



**Nasreen**

## 4. Teenagers need you to watch and listen to them carefully.



**Laura**

5. Young people need to know their feelings are accepted.
6. Teenagers need help with overwhelming feelings.



**Marcus**



## 7. Young people need to be involved and included.



**Adam**

## 8. Teenagers need to carry on with routine activities.



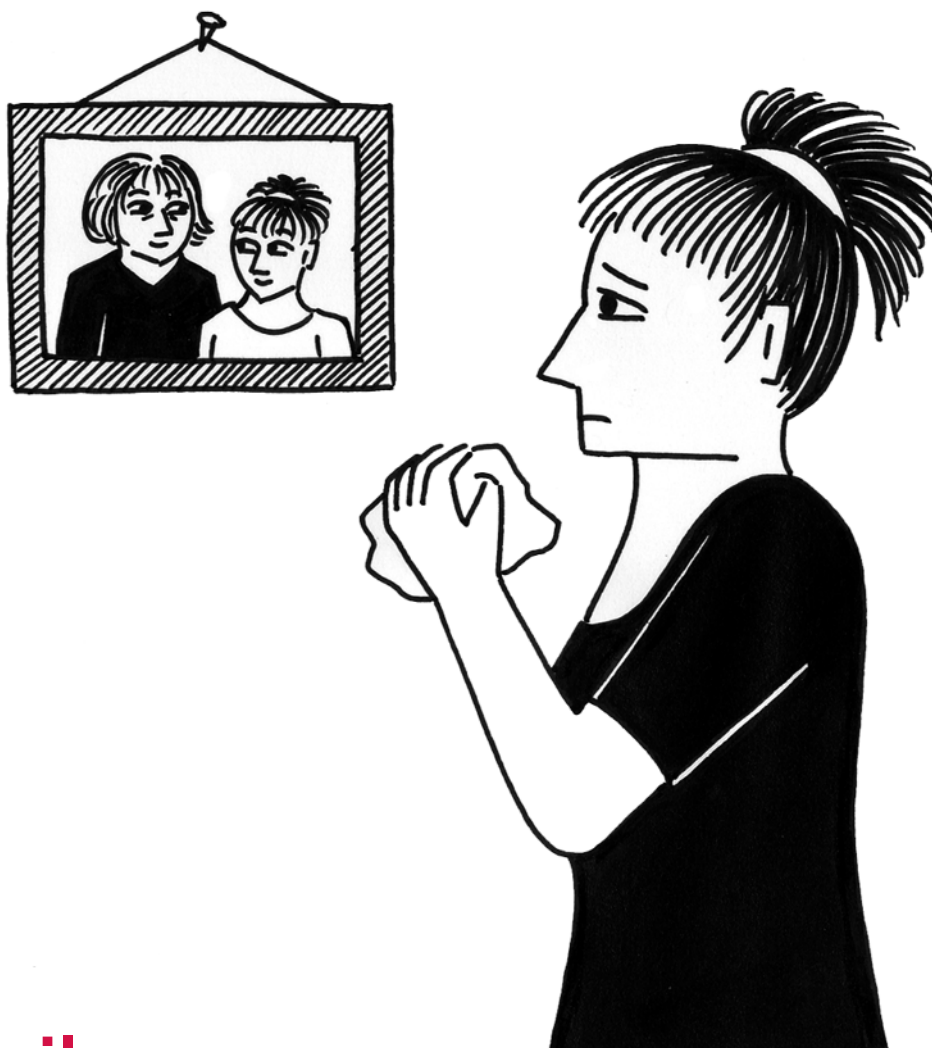
**Marcus**

## 9. Young people need to see other people grieving.



**Marcus's mum**

# 10. Young people need opportunities to remember.



**Emily**

(a)

What is "normal" for a bereaved teenager?  
How do I know when expert help is needed?

(b)

What should I do in the immediate aftermath of a death, to help a teenager or their carer? Should I say anything, or send a card?

(c)

What helps bereaved teenagers to talk?

(d)

What can we do to stop young people blaming themselves or others unrealistically?

(e)

When a bereaved teenager is behaving badly, how should we respond?

(f)

For how long will a young person grieve?

(g)

Should staff share their own feelings with teenagers? How can staff support each other?

(h)

Are there any significant times or events where we need to be especially thoughtful about a bereaved teenager's experience?

(i)

How might other young people react when one of their peers is bereaved?

(j)

How will a death affect a teenager for whom this is just another difficult thing in their life that they have to deal with?

(k)

Should we talk about heaven?

(l)

What do you say if a parent has died not from illness but from suicide, murder, drug abuse or a preventable accident?

(m)

How can we help bereaved teenagers to feel more secure?

(n)

How do you help a teenager while they are adjusting to a new home or carer?

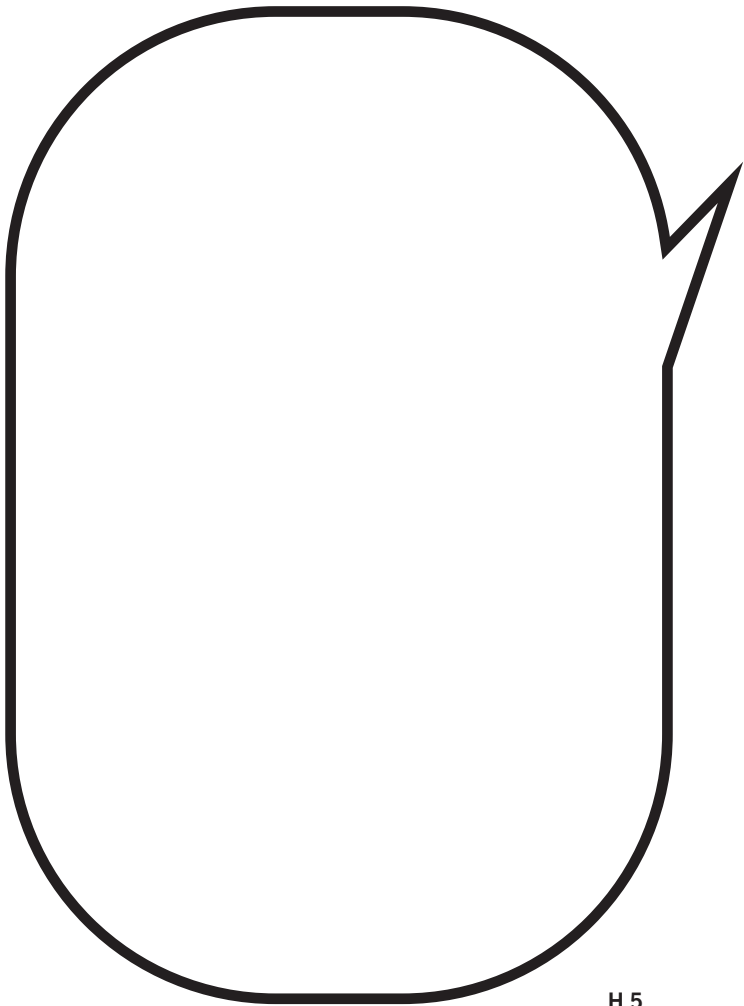
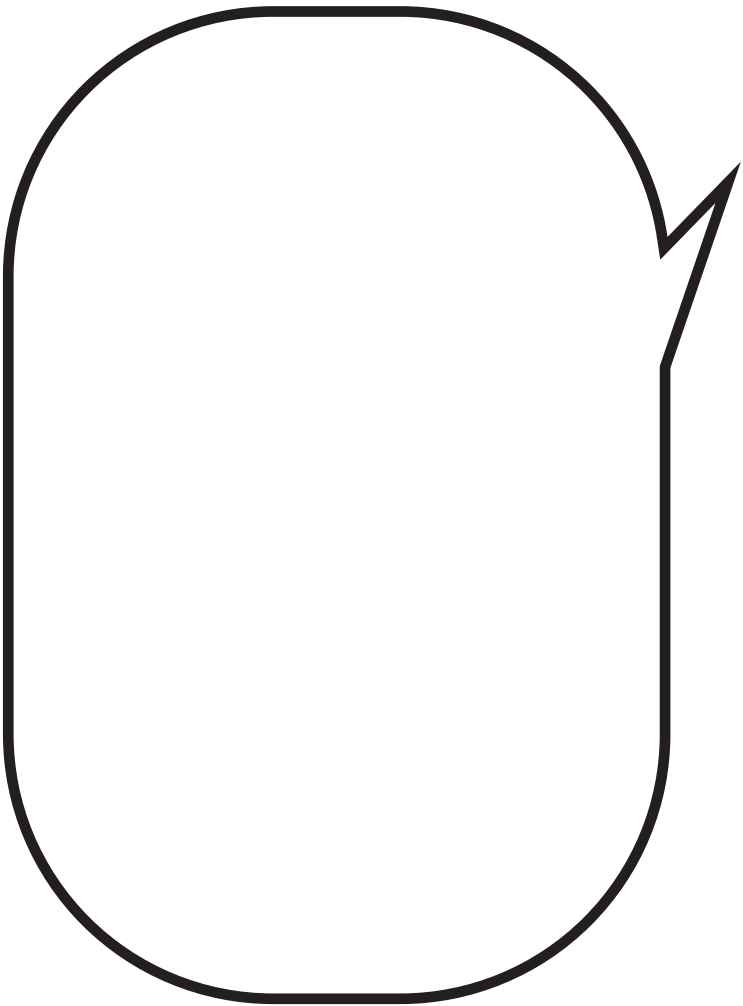
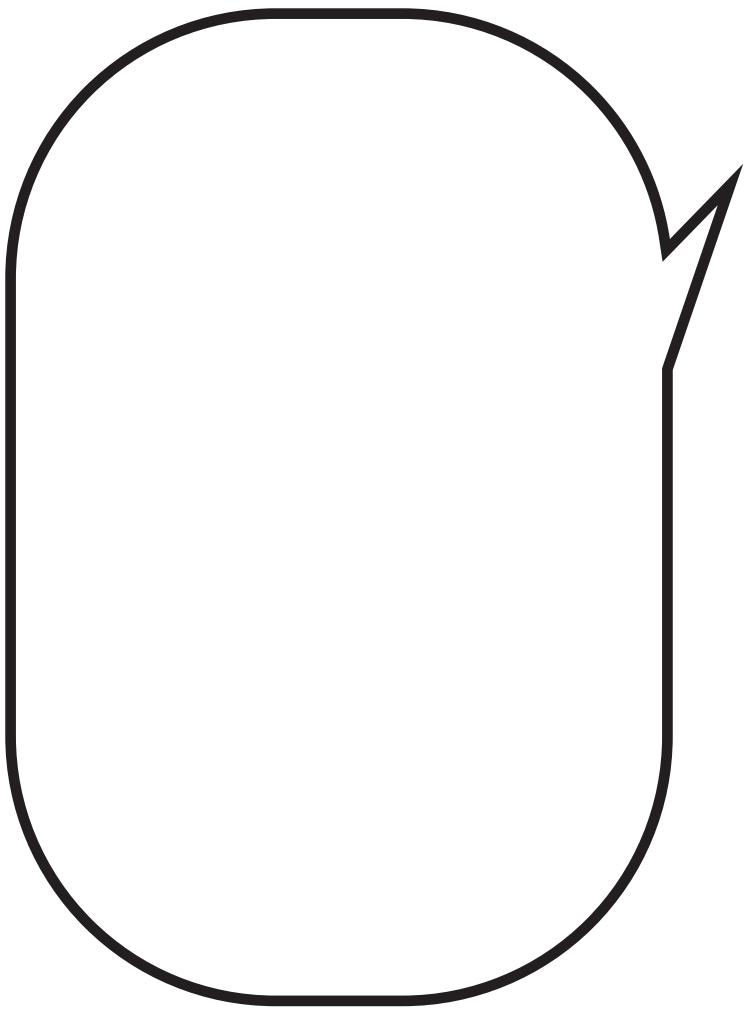
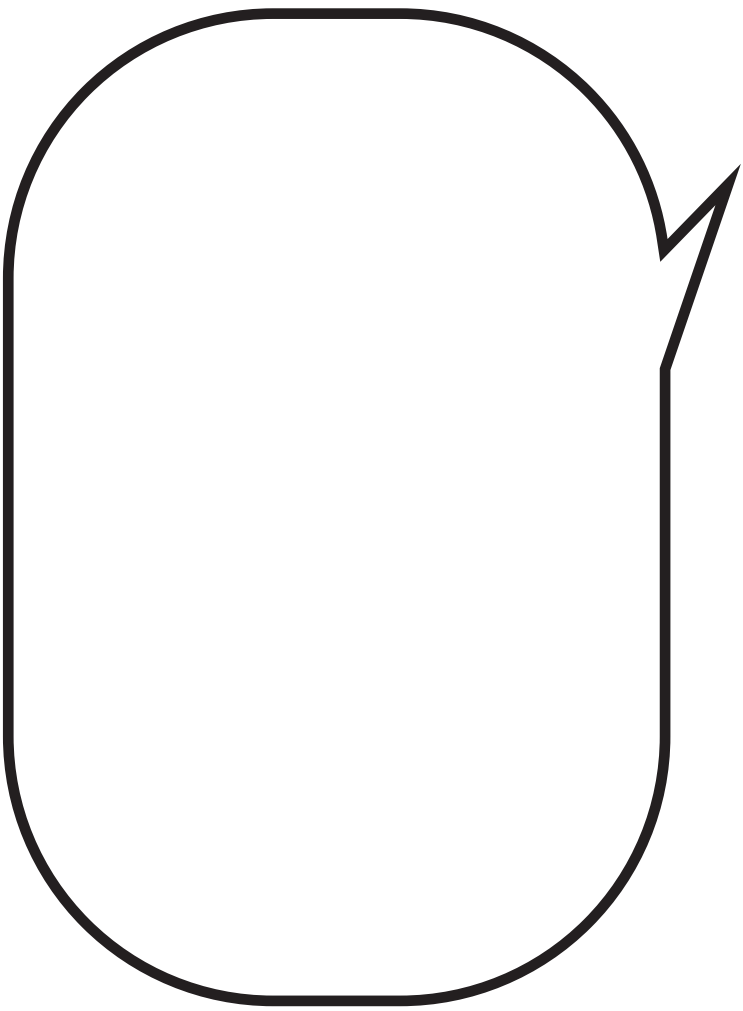
(o)

Where could we raise issues about death and bereavement in the secondary school curriculum?

(p)

If a parent who died was estranged from the one who is now looking after a young person, what issues might arise?





# Tutor's Notes on Frequently Asked Questions

## Introduction

There are no definitive "right" answers to these questions. The main purpose of the questions is to promote thought and discussion. Many of the following points are likely to be made by participants in the session. Where they have not been made you may, when you deem it appropriate, bring some of the following thoughts into the discussion.

### **(a) What is "normal" for a bereaved teenager? How do I know when expert help is needed?**

- Adolescence is a time of rapid growth and change. Mood swings, angry outbursts, sullenness, risk taking and other challenging behaviour are all a normal part of being a teenager.
- Most grieving young people can be helped by friends and family listening, paying attention to them and respecting their feelings.
- Many bereaved young people benefit from meeting others who have been bereaved to share their experience.
- However, if grief continues to overwhelm them, or the young person remains unable to cope with day-to-day life, or you are aware that they may be suicidal, or their behaviour is causing danger to themselves or others, contact with a professional is advisable.
- Bereavement following suicide, murder or other traumatic death may be particularly difficult.
- If a young person's home situation is particularly chaotic or dysfunctional, this can be another indicator that more in-depth help is required.
- If not sure, seek advice rather than just leave it.
- Sources of help include your own doctor, a specialist bereavement service, a family social worker or a school counsellor.

### **(b) What should I do in the immediate aftermath of a death, to help a teenager or their carer? Should I say anything, or send a card?**

- This is a significant event in a young person's life and we need to acknowledge it. Just saying something like "I am very sorry to hear your father has died" is important. It helps the teenager to know that you are aware of the death.
- A card or note to a carer acknowledges this loss and may give you the opportunity to offer help.
- Talk to colleagues about who needs to know about the death and how you will share this information.

### **c) What helps bereaved teenagers to talk?**

- Everyone finds it easier to talk to someone they feel comfortable with, in a reasonably private setting, and when there is plenty of time.
- Often doing something together (a car journey, a shopping trip, a game of cards, or any practical activity), may provide ideal informal opportunities to talk.
- You cannot make a teenager talk about their grief if they do not want to, and they may resent being made to feel under pressure.
- There are many ways to express grief apart from talking (for example: playing music, writing, sharing on the internet, or doing something that reminds you of the person who has died).

### **d) What can we do to stop young people blaming themselves or others unrealistically?**

- Straightforward reassurance is important. In many cases words such as “there is nothing anyone (or we) could have done to stop Dad dying” are helpful.
- Pay attention to what a teenager says or does, so that you can reassure them if they show signs of guilt or regret about things they have done.
- Sometimes there may have been angry disagreements between a young person and the deceased. It can help to put these into context with their whole relationship. “Mum knew you loved her. Having rows is part of growing up.”
- Remind them of positive things they did for the person who died. For example, “Your sister loved going shopping with you”.
- If a close family member or carer has a terminal illness it is important that teenagers are informed.

### **(e) When a bereaved teenager is behaving badly, how should we respond?**

- Make sure that you do not label a young person “bad” because of particular behaviours. Noticing when, where and with whom a teenager behaves in a certain way will help you to find ways of responding appropriately.
- It is generally helpful to keep consistent boundaries. Knowing there are limits helps young people feel more secure.
- Whilst still keeping boundaries it is helpful to acknowledge feelings that may be being expressed. “I can see that you are very angry, it is OK to be angry, but not OK to swear at me”.
- It is quite common for anyone to be less capable and appear to go backwards for a time following a bereavement. Concentration and other abilities may not be at the level they were before, especially if a young person feels anxious or afraid.
- Addressing the needs of the teenager (for instance, for information, reassurance and security) may help to address the underlying cause of difficult behaviour.

## **(f) For how long will a young person grieve?**

- A significant bereavement will be part of their experience for the rest of their life.
- Certain events, reminders or anniversaries are likely to trigger feelings and thoughts about the dead person.
- Getting on with life is really important to teenagers. This often involves spending time with their friends and doing things that mean they can temporarily forget what has happened. This does not mean they don't care or are not grieving.
- As time goes on they may re-visit a death with new awareness and understanding. This may trigger new feelings of grief.
- Studies have shown that teenagers are affected by bereavement for a long time. The Harvard Bereavement study reported that a significant proportion of children and young people showed more emotional distress two years after a death, than immediately following their bereavement.

## **(g) Should staff share their own feelings with teenagers? How can staff support each other?**

- Young people learn from others. Often it is through adults talking about their thoughts and feelings that teenagers make sense of their own experience.
- In supporting a young person we need to focus on their experience rather than our own. However it is important to acknowledge your own feelings, especially where they also recognise a teenager's loss e.g. "I felt so sad when I heard about your brother's death".
- Talking about your own experience of loss - without assuming that a bereaved teenager will feel the same - can be very helpful.
- All staff that work with a bereaved teenager need to be informed as quickly and clearly as possible about a death.
- In supporting staff it is important to respect individual differences. Some may need the opportunity to talk; others may prefer to cope by getting involved in other activities or focussing on the needs of the young people. It is valuable to acknowledge the impact a bereavement may have on the staff.
- Some time at staff meetings can be given to acknowledge the impact of a death and to address any issues and questions that have arisen.

## **(h) Are there any significant times or events where we need to be especially thoughtful about a bereaved teenager's experience?**

- Birthdays, religious festivals, visits or meetings with people that have a particular connection to the deceased may all trigger strong feelings of loss. All these occasions also provide opportunities to remember the person who has died and honour the importance of their relationship.
- Openly acknowledging the anniversary is helpful. Sometimes the young person may tell you about a significant date, at others it may be valuable for a key member of staff to make records so that they are aware of important dates.

- Having acknowledged someone's absence it can be helpful to give a clear message that it is OK for teenagers to have fun and carry on normal activities. For instance, "Happy Birthday Joe, you must miss your mum today, but I bet she would really want you to enjoy your birthday".
- Some aspects of the school curriculum may need to be handled sensitively, for example, in science, the topic of life processes and decomposition (where someone has been buried), or in English, history or RE, stories or beliefs about loss and death. It is important not to avoid these subjects, but to be aware that they may have a different impact on a bereaved young person.
- School parents' evenings, reports, exam results and even routine letters home may be hard for a teenager who has lost a parent.

**(i) How might other young people react when one of their peers is bereaved?**

- They may react in a whole host of ways; some common reactions are fear, disbelief, denial, anger and sympathy.
- Being given clear information about the death and how to support the bereaved person will help them.
- Teenagers sometimes use 'difference' as a cue to bully. The bereaved young person's own behaviour may add to the perceived difference. For example they may exhibit angry and aggressive behaviour that triggers reprisals.
- Bullying often comes about from fear and lack of understanding or knowledge. Teenagers find it frightening to think that someone so significant can die. They may bully as a reaction to their own uncomfortable feelings.

**(j) How will a death affect a teenager for whom this is just another difficult thing in their life that they have to deal with?**

- For some young people, home situations and relationships can be complicated and confusing. When a death occurs they may struggle to identify for whom they are grieving and what their relationship to that person was.
- Occasionally a death may bring relief from a difficult or abusive relationship, but once someone has died it feels like there is no chance to put things right. This may result in mixed feelings of guilt, confusion, regret, anger and new hope for the future.
- The combination of difficult feelings and circumstances may lead to a young person "acting out" their internal distress. They may be more likely to get into trouble or take risks (for example, with drugs or alcohol).
- Sometimes grieving goes on hold until other issues are dealt with, or a death may be a catalyst to deal with other problems.
- Teenagers might need help to unravel the complexities in their life and then support with bereavement when the time is right. They will need to feel reasonably safe and supported to be able to process their feelings around a death.

### **(k) Should we talk about heaven?**

- For many young people and families it is natural and important to talk about heaven or another form of after life. Equally other families believe there is no life after death. The teenager's belief may not be the same as their family's, and may change over time. It is important to acknowledge and respect this part of a teenager's reality.
- When there is a death this can challenge beliefs or raise issues that have not seemed so important before.
- In a secular setting, it may be appropriate to reflect on a range of beliefs, e.g. "Some people believe ... , other people think..." or to encourage the young person to talk about their own beliefs.
- Remember each family and individual has their own interpretation of religious or other belief. Where this is important, consult the young person.

### **(l) What do you say if a parent has died not from illness but from suicide, murder, drug abuse or a preventable accident?**

- We need to acknowledge this loss like any other. We naturally want to protect people from difficult and traumatic events but pretending that they have not happened does not help in the long run.
- Sometimes it may be appropriate for a teenager to learn the whole story about a death piece by piece. It takes time for the reality of a sudden death to sink in. Giving more, and repeated information about the death can help, whilst being sensitive to what the young person can cope with at any one time.
- There are occasions when certain details about a death are public knowledge and the young person may be surrounded by people talking about a death. In these cases it is important to give the teenager the best information possible.
- Sometimes we may doubt a young person's story about a death because it shocks us or does not seem to make sense. Initially accept their version of events and if unsure find a way to check. This may be complicated because different rumours spread around communities following traumatic death.
- If there is a great deal of anger in the family about a death, then some understanding of who or what the anger is directed at helps a young person to know that they are not being blamed.
- Traumatic death may be an area where professional support is especially useful for staff, young people and their families.

### **(m) How can we help bereaved teenagers to feel more secure?**

- Though they may not ask for it, bereaved young people do need comfort and reassurance. In particular, the first time they do something after a death may be the hardest, for example, coming back to school, or doing something they would normally have done with the deceased.
- Wherever possible give them some control and choice, for example, asking whether they want to come in at the beginning of school or after break-time on the first day.
- At school, college or work it can help to have a nominated person that a teenager can go and see if they are feeling overwhelmed.
- Continuity is helpful, and the chance to do things that are familiar. Often a priority for teenagers is to spend time with their friends.
- Encourage the young person to take part in activities (like sport or music or having a bath) which are relaxing, soothing or allow them to let off steam.

### **(n) How do you help a teenager while they are adjusting to a new home or carer?**

- Be sensitive to the impact of the change; pay close attention to how the young person is responding.
- Acknowledge the reality of the change by talking about differences. For example, "It must be very different now that you are sharing a room with Chris,..."
- Where possible allow the young person some choice. Even being given small choices ("Which duvet cover do you want?") helps to give a sense of some personal control.
- Find out about familiar routines and keep as many as possible.
- Allow the young person to take their time to adjust; allow them to express negative feelings about the change, including towards new carers in their lives.
- This situation may be one where a professional setting – school, youth club or work – may provide valuable continuity and familiarity.

### **(o) Where could we raise issues about death and bereavement in the secondary school curriculum?**

- Sometimes a school may need to find ways to respond to a death within its community. One way may be to use particular subjects as a forum to explore relevant issues. It is important to provide opportunities for pupils to explore their feelings, as well as address their needs for information and reassurance. For example art or English are ideal subjects to creatively express feelings and memories. Science could be used to provide information about an illness that led to a death.
- The topic of death and bereavement is so important that it should be included in the curriculum as a matter of course. This may help young people who have been bereaved in the past and prepare them for future losses.
- Ideally this would be addressed when teachers are planning their work for a coming term or year. For example in Citizenship, PSHE and RE, customs and rituals surrounding death could be explored with classroom discussion. History and Geography may provide an insight into different human experiences of death and change.
- Examples of lessons linked to particular subjects in all key stages are available on the schools' section of the Winston's Wish website. The Childhood Bereavement Trust's website includes a list of useful books, including 'Childhood Bereavement: Developing the Curriculum and pastoral support' by Nina Job and Gill Frances (2004).

### **(p) If a parent who died was estranged from the one who is now looking after a young person, what issues might arise?**

- There may be family conflict, including issues about custody of the young person.
- The teenager may have to cope with a lot of further changes. These might include moving house, changing school/college/work, losing or gaining contact with relatives or friends and having a new main carer.
- This is a potentially difficult situation for everyone. It will make a great difference if people can see the young person's needs as a priority when considering practical arrangements.
- Where there was little contact with the parent who died it may take longer for the death to fully register. This may be a death and relationship that the young person will need to re-visit as they get older.
- The surviving parent or carer may need to contain their own negative feelings about the deceased, to allow the teenager to freely mourn their loss.
- In a situation where the parent who died had a difficult relationship with the young person, grieving will be more complicated. The teenager has lost the chance for things to be better, and memories may be painful rather than comforting.



# Useful Organisations

**Childhood Bereavement Network** (a national co-ordinating organisation, which can help you find out more about support and training available in your area).

[www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk) 0207 843 6309

email [cbn@ncb.org.uk](mailto:cbn@ncb.org.uk)

8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE

**Child Bereavement Trust** (provides training and educational resources)

[www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk) 01494 446 648

email [enquiries@childbereavement.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@childbereavement.org.uk)

Aston House, High Street, West Wycombe, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, HP14 3AG

**Cruse Bereavement Care** (offers counselling and support to all bereaved, and runs a website and helpline for bereaved young people)

[www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk) (general website)

[www.rd4u.org.uk](http://www.rd4u.org.uk) (young people's website) 0870 167 1677

email [helpline@crusebereavementcare.org.uk](mailto:helpline@crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

Cruse House, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond-upon-Thames, Surrey, TW9 1UR

**Leeds Animation Workshop** (have produced three DVDs about bereavement: "Grief in the Family", "Not too Young to Grieve" and "Teenage Grief", as well as many more films on social issues)

[www.leedsanimation.org.uk](http://www.leedsanimation.org.uk) 0113 248 4997

email [info@leedsanimation.org.uk](mailto:info@leedsanimation.org.uk) 45 Bayswater Row, Leeds, LS8 5LF

## Winston's Wish

(a grief programme for Gloucestershire children which also provides a wide range of useful training materials and advice, nationally)

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk) Helpline: 0845 20 30 40 5 (calls charged at local rates)

email [info@winstonswish.org.uk](mailto:info@winstonswish.org.uk)

Clara Burgess Centre, 80-86 Bath Road, Bayshill Road, Cheltenham, GL53 7JT

## Local Organisations: